

Toward A Sustainable Future

Cambridge Growth Policy

UPDATE 2007

OPEN SPACE





Open Space

The open space Policies 63-70 enumerated in 1993 remain relevant today. The limitations inherent in a fully developed city, which influenced the creation of those policies then, continue to shape the opportunities available to the City today in managing its open space resources. The *Report of the Green Ribbon Open Space Committee*, published in 2000, provides a comprehensive assessment of the community's open space and recreational needs, and identifies priorities for acquisition and programming. The report makes clear the challenges facing the City in meeting its open space needs, and provides a guide for meeting that challenge consistent with the policies enumerated in *Toward a Sustainable Future*. Considerable activity has been evident in the intervening fourteen years, in ways anticipated in 1993 and sometimes in unexpected ways.

Use of Open Space Facilities

The Green Ribbon report identifies seventy-eight public open space and recreational facilities in the city, totaling nearly 500 acres. As is to be expected for a dense and complex community like Cambridge, the variety of demands placed on these facilities is enormous: organized sports for school-aged children in soccer, baseball and football; informal pickup games for college students or adults; lunch in the park for office workers; play opportunities for tots with their parents and older children on their own; a quiet retreat for those in retirement, tourists in the city for a visit, or anyone after a busy day; and even in this urban environment, an opportunity to view and experience natural areas and wildlife.

As indicated in the report, the City's strong fiscal position has allowed Cambridge to make significant investments in its existing park facilities, responding to new demands as neighborhoods change and grow, and to actually acquire new facilities to an extent perhaps not easily imagined in 1993. In the past fourteen years, the City has been able to rehabilitate, and sometimes reprogram, many of its parks resulting in a total investment of several million dollars. The plan for the redesign of each park has generally followed extensive consultation with the users of the park and affected residents in the vicinity. Modernization has allowed the City to introduce new kinds of services into the parks, such as computer-programmed water play equipment to eliminate hazards, and pressure-treated wood play equipment in tot lots. Also, designs that failed to live up to their promise have been revised, such as parks that had too much concrete and asphalt, and not enough green space. This ongoing program has had a positive visual and functional impact on neighborhoods as colorful new play equipment has been installed throughout the community.

Policy 65 recognized the unrealized potential of state recreational facilities—which must serve a regional clientele—to meet some of the needs of adjacent Cambridge neighborhoods. Building on that idea, the City has been able to enter into an agree-



Basketball is very popular at the recently renovated Corporal Burns Park in Riverside.

POLICY 63

Open space and recreational facilities serving a wide range of functions and clientele, including the elderly and special needs populations, should be encouraged, either through expansion of the existing inventory, through multiple use of existing facilities, or through creative programming of those facilities.

POLICY 64

Conservation lands and other environmentally sensitive areas are a vital part of the city's open space system and should be maintained and protected appropriately. Public access to and use of these areas must be carefully planned and balanced with preservation of these resources.

POLICY 65

Expansion of Cambridge residents' opportunities to use regional recreational facilities (those owned by the Metropolitan District Commission and the Commonwealth) located in the city should be encouraged, particularly where the adjacent residential community is underserved by local recreational facilities, and when the legitimate regional use of that facility would not be unduly restricted. In addition, there should be increased coordination of recreation programming and planning between the local and regional levels.

POLICY 66

New open space facilities, including larger ones for organized activities, should be considered for those private developments where the size of the development, the amount of land area and/or the ownership patterns provide the flexibility to accommodate such a facility without loss of economic value for other uses.



University Park Common includes grassy lawns at the request of neighbors who participated in the design process.

ment with the Department of Conservation and Recreation (formerly the MDC) that has allowed the community to gain additional recreational access to Magazine Beach in exchange for financial assistance in rehabilitating the facility, which is still a work in progress.

New Open Space in Development Areas

Policy 66 suggested the inclusion of new parks in large-scale commercial developments. The central open space at University Park was the prototype envisioned in this policy; University Park Common, which opened in 2000, serves as the centerpiece for the development and a resource for residents of University Park as well as the nearby Cambridgeport neighborhood. With twenty-three acres in a single ownership, University Park is uncommon. There will not be many similar circumstances in the future where a large park can be similarly created.

Nevertheless, the ECaPS Rezoning adopted by the City Council in 2001 envisions the creation of another large public park as part of future development of the underutilized portions of the federal Volpe Transportation Center in the heart of Kendall Square. Zoning is in place to encourage that eventuality should portions of the parcel be made available for private development. Also envisioned in the ECaPS Rezoning, in the North Point project being developed by Jones Lang LaSalle, a dramatic new public park is about to be created in circumstances somewhat similar to University Park. At the center of the 45-acre multiuse project, a five-acre public park was approved by the Planning Board in 2005 and is now under construction. This park, the first of about nine acres of required green space, accompanies the first phase of the development, which also includes two residential buildings and associated new streets. The park will eventually contain a community center, a small pond, man-made wetlands, a portion of the regional multi-use bike and hiking path connecting the western suburbs to the Charles River waterfront, and will also function as a filter and storage area for stormwater runoff from the development.

Additionally, the adjacent Archstone Smith housing development will feature a three-quarter acre green space fronting onto Monsignor O'Brien Highway. A pathway from this space through the Archstone Smith building will lead northward to a small tot lot and then to Jones Lang LaSalle's central park.

The open spaces in both private projects will also relate to the newly created 40 acres of state-owned parkland referred to as the New Charles River Basin. The Cambridge section, called North Point Park, will be a 16-acre riverside promenade along the Charles River. The park is to open in 2007, and in the future, a skateboard park and other recreational uses may be built to complement the waterside paths and lawns now nearing completion.

Another mixed-use project with an important central open space is the project known as Cambridge Research Park, north of Kendall Square along Third Street. A new urban plaza of 1.5 acres was constructed in this mixed-use project, which will ultimately contain more than 1.2 million square feet of development, includ-



North Point Park is one of the principal features of the New Charles River Basin, which was required as mitigation for the impacts of the Central Artery highway ramps.

ing residences, office/research and development, concert halls, and retail. The main plaza serves the public and the tenants in the adjacent office buildings as a lunch space, a performance venue, a place to relax and unwind for three seasons of the year, and includes a skating rink in the winter months.

Acquisition of New Open Space

Acquisition of new open space in Cambridge has always been a challenge, given the scarcity of land, the competition for available sites from other uses (like private or assisted housing), and the high cost of acquisition. Policy 67 and the Green Ribbon report both recognize that difficulty, but also urge the expansion of the open space inventory whenever the obstacles of price and availability can be overcome. Despite those challenges, over the past fourteen years the City has been relatively successful in acquiring new open spaces to serve a variety of functions, through a variety of mechanisms, including purchase.

The Pacific Street Park in Cambridgeport has been active for years as a formal and informal sports field for the neighborhood. It was first leased to the City by MIT in 1995. The fee ownership of this park was then transferred to the City in 2000, after the Institute utilized the development rights available on the park site to construct the Pacific Street dormitory on an adjacent parcel across Sidney Street. The zoning mechanism used to make such a transfer possible (“Transfer of Development Rights”) has been adopted elsewhere in the zoning ordinance with the hope that additional parks might be created in East Cambridge and Alewife.

With funds appropriated for the purpose, the City was able to purchase non-conforming commercial buildings in Neighborhood 4 to expand the existing Harvard Street Park. After a long planning effort with the neighborhood, the buildings were demolished in late 2005, and construction of an expanded park is underway.



The MIT dormitory on the lower right took allowable floor area from the park site on the lower left; the dormitory is thus larger than would otherwise be allowed, while the open space of the park is gained for public use. University Park Common is also visible in the upper center of the photo. (Photo courtesy of Forest City Enterprises)

Nearby, the purchase of another old mill building for conversion to affordable housing (the former Squirrel Brand Nut factory) has enabled the City to convert a community garden that had been leased from year to year into a permanent public neighborhood park and community garden. The creation of a playground for the Fletcher-Maynard Academy also occurred as part of this set of open space improvements.

The park space anticipated at Quincy Square in *Toward a Sustainable Future* in 1993 was fully realized in 1998, through the recapturing of excessive paving at the inter-



Quincy Square was an unattractive and hazardous intersection. It was unclear how pedestrians should circulate in this sea of asphalt.



The City transformed Quincy Square into the welcoming eastern entry into Harvard Square, with a plaza, new plantings, and clearly marked pedestrian crossings.

section of four streets. The resulting park and enhanced landscaping is now a focal point at the eastern end of Harvard Square; it was partially paid for by the parking and open space fund established in the Harvard Square Overlay District zoning. Similar park space will soon be emerging from the reconstruction of the equally complicated intersection of streets at Lafayette Square at the eastern end of Central Square. Part of a larger realignment of traffic patterns in association with the development of the University Park complex, the resulting plazas and landscaped sitting areas will give a new urban focus to a formerly inhospitable traffic intersection.

While Policy 67 and the Green Ribbon report both encourage the acquisition of open space where there is a clear need (in the dense eastern neighborhoods particularly), acquisition will probably always be driven in significant measure by available opportunities. Fortunately, recent acquisitions have been in those neighborhoods identified as most in need, but future purchases may have to be in useful locations wherever the land becomes available. With the long-awaited completion of the transfer of the trolley yard parcel in North Cambridge to the City in 2001, the public use of the land to develop affordable housing and green space was secured. The housing is under construction as plans for the open space are being finalized. In addition, the redevelopment of the former Mahoney's site in Riverside will include the creation of a new public park on land that Harvard will deed to the City.

Since 2002, the City has benefited from the state matching fund provided through the Community Preservation Act. A total of \$4.7 million has been given to open space projects. To date, these funds have been used for work at the Fresh Pond Reservation and in acquiring open space to protect the Cambridge watershed in Lincoln.

Retention of Open Space

Parks in cities have often been vulnerable to the pressing demands for alternate uses. Certainly, vacant land in a densely developed urban area may be attractive for many worthy projects, from affordable housing to municipal facilities. Policy 68 urges resistance to converting park space to any other use except in extraordinary circumstances, and Cambridge has been faithful to that objective.

There have been instances of construction on the periphery of parks, with either inconsequential impacts or with significant enhancement of the park facility:

- the construction of the Frisoli Youth Center at the Harrington School and Donnelly Field, which provides a community center function logically related to the two other uses on the site.
- the conversion of Neville Manor into an assisted living facility at Fresh Pond, where the degraded environment was improved with the construction of a well-designed building and landscaping;
- the recently approved addition to the Main Library adjacent to Joan Lorentz Park, where the project will actually result in an increase in the area of open space at the site;

POLICY 67

Acquisition of publicly owned or administered open space should be made in those dense residential areas clearly deficient in all forms of open space, but only where significant fiscal resources are provided through federal or state acquisition programs or a substantial portion of the cost is borne privately; facilities of modest size and flexible in use characteristics, located close to the homes of the persons for whom they are intended should be encouraged.

POLICY 68

Only under extraordinary circumstances should existing open space facilities be eliminated from the city's inventory for other uses; small, passively or merely visually used facilities, should not be undervalued in this regard merely for lack of intensive or active recreational use.

POLICY 69

The city should encourage the permanent retention and protection of useful, effective, attractive private open space whether publicly accessible or not. Community use of private recreational and open space facilities in the city should be encouraged at reasonable levels where the private function of those facilities would not be impaired and where the recreational activity provided by the private facility is not well served in available public facilities.

- and the reconstruction of the water treatment plant (an essential element of the water distribution system of the city, which is the reason for the very existence of Fresh Pond Reservation) that has had the secondary effect of significant enhancements to the recreational quality of adjacent portions of the reservation.

Maintenance of Open Space

The City continues to make substantial investments in its park facilities. The renovation of Russell Field was recently completed, and includes a state-of-the-art field with artificial turf and a field house for the high school football team. Danahy Park has continued to improve with, among other modifications, the installation of very successful artificial turf on the main soccer playing field. A master plan has been



The water treatment plant project included significant landscaping work in addition to the new building, which now functions as a landmark for this part of West Cambridge.

POLICY 70

Repair, maintenance and timely upgrading of existing facilities should be the City's highest fiscal priority with regard to open space and recreational facilities. The City should explore, and adopt as appropriate, mechanisms whereby the private sector can reasonably provide, assist in and/or contribute to the maintenance of publicly useable open space and recreational facilities.

developed for the Fresh Pond Reservation, and portions of that plan are scheduled for implementation by the City and the Water Department.

Recent park renovations have been completed at neighborhood parks such as Dana Park in Cambridgeport and the King School Playground in Riverside, as well as Bergin Park and Reverend Williams Park in North Cambridge. Smaller parks also renovated include Franklin Park in Riverside, Lowell School Park in West Cambridge, and the Maple Avenue tot lot in Mid-Cambridge. The inclusion of new computer-controlled waterplay in many of the parks across the city has further broadened the appeal of the parks.

Recently completed renovations to major neighborhood parks, such as Gold Star Mothers Park in East Cambridge and the Baldwin School playground in Agassiz, as well as planned improvements to the Tobin School Playground, will continue to

make high quality parks and open space available to neighborhoods throughout the city. Many parks are under maintenance contracts with private firms managed by the Public Works Department. Everywhere, well-maintained or refurbished parks are highly valued features of the community's neighborhoods and commercial centers.



Before it was redesigned, Franklin Park had become a rather dark place, and the many steps and hard surfaces kept it from being well used.



After renovations were done, Franklin Park has received many plaudits as a greatly improved space.

